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ABSTRACT

Urban community colleges can be distinguished from other community colleges in terms of their settings, clientele, richness and diversity of staff resources, and importance to the segments of the population who cluster in major national centers of commerce and government. In light of their unique characteristics, these institutions require study as a distinctive subset of the larger community college movement to determine their goals and objectives and success in achieving them. The two fundamental criteria for determining this success are effectiveness (i.e., performing a legitimate function for which a need exists at some acceptable level of quality) and efficiency (i.e., producing at as high a level of output as possible with as low a level of inputs or costs as possible). The main difficulty in determining the success of community colleges arises from different views of effectiveness. One view would link effectiveness to success in carrying out priorities that are similar to the priorities of those who pay the bill. Another view would maintain that effectiveness is measured by assessing the level of agreement among faculty and administrators with respect to their support for institutional priorities. Future research contrasting these views of institutional effectiveness may illuminate some of the conflicting forces with which administrators must cope as well as strategies available to reconcile them. (HB)

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ASSESSING EXCELLENCE/EFFECTIVENESS IN URBAN SETTINGS

Richard C. Richardson

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ASSESSING EXCELLENCE/EFFECTIVENESS IN URBAN SETTINGS

Urban community colleges are important and exciting institutions. This statement is not made to disparage the importance or innovative character of other kinds of community colleges, but rather in an attempt to suggest that urban community colleges are distinctive in terms of their settings, clientele, richness and diversity of staff resources, and in their importance to segments of our population who, for a variety of reasons, cluster in our major national centers of commerce and government. Because urban community colleges are both distinctive and important, we need research to identify their constraints, their priorities, the strategies they choose for achieving priorities, and the essential contributions they make to the populations they serve. It is our perspective that urban institutions will be understood by the general public and by the legislators who fund them, only as they are seen in relation to their context and that comparisons between urban community colleges and other types of institutions outside the urban setting run a very real risk of performing a significant disservice to both.

My presentation has three purposes. First, I want to summarize a few of the arguments for studying urban community colleges as a distinctive sub-set rather than as a part of a larger community college movement. Second, I will

discuss concepts of efficiency, effectiveness and excellence as these might be applied to the urban setting, to guide field research. Finally, I will describe a cooperative approach to research involving university graduate programs and urban community colleges that produced the two studies that will be described by my colleagues.

Urban community colleges are distinctive in terms of their settings. From Borough Manhattan in the shadow of the World Trade Towers, to Metropolitan, an architectural inspiration to inner city residents of Cleveland; from South Mountain, a promise kept to the minorities of South Phoenix to Los Angeles City College, a grand old campus just off the Hollywood expressway before it plunges into downtown Los Angeles, these institutions occupy strategic positions that place them at the crossroads of our civilization.

In many of these urban colleges, minorities are in the majority. One hears every language spoken on the face of the earth. Recent immigrants from Asia, Central America and many other regions of the world, struggle with the English language, excel in science and math, or cope with the shock of transition from their 3rd World origins, to the most advanced and sophisticated nation of our era. Among these populations, the promise of America is not out-of-date, and the urban community college is on the line to deliver.

Matching the diversity of student clientele is the richness and quality of staff resources. Urban colleges account for many of our most prominent national leaders. Their staffs include our best recognized experts on dealing

with the most difficult types of learning problems. And our urban staffs are multicultural and bilingual to a degree that most other institutions can only envy.

Because they are educational melting pots, urban community colleges are centers of great interest to foundations and a variety of levels of government. The resources that flow from this interest guarantee their status as centers of innovation, if not or affluence. In brief, urban community colleges are where much of the action is and as such, are of special interest to many of us who see ourselves primarily as researchers.

Urban community colleges as organizations, have some similarities with all organizations, just as they have differences. If you are interested in research, it generally makes sense to start with the similarities and move from there to the unique characteristics. Urban community colleges, like all organizations, must fulfill two criteria to remain in business. They must be effective in the sense of performing some legitimate function for which a need exists at some acceptable level of quality. Our national slogan is "Opportunity With Excellence". Excellence implies a very high level of effectiveness in performing a needed and legitimate function. Making it possible for students to complete the first two years of a baccalaureate degree is one example of a needed and legitimate function.

But all organizations, including urban community colleges, must not only be effective. They must also be efficient. Efficiency means the ratio of outputs to costs. That is, the number of student credit hours generated per one hundred dollars of expenditures. The need to be efficient thus acts as a

constraint upon the desire to be effective. It turns out that opportunity with excellence is not always a priority of those who preside over the public purse. For example, prisons exist to house offenders. There is a wide range of quality that might be achieved in performing this legitimate function. Taxpayers, however, are extremely critical of a country-club atmosphere. Thus, we learn that important tasks should be performed well, but not too well. In this way, it becomes clear that urban community colleges, like other organizations, must be concerned not only by the relative importance of what they do, but in addition, must address critical cost benefit ratios.

One of the problems of dealing with the effectiveness/efficiency issue involves the multiple definitions of effectiveness, as well as the growing public concern with this side of the equation. In contrast, many community colleges have remained preoccupied with efficiency. They want to tell everybody how cheap they are in relation to other forms of higher education. They cite the numbers they serve, as further evidence of efficiency, but public policy makers keep asking - "but how well are you doing whatever it is you're doing".

We are not so well equipped to answer these effectiveness queries except in very general or anecdotal ways. To assist urban colleges in responding to effectiveness/excellence questions, our research has adapted a definition of effectiveness suggested by Miles. His ecology model recognizes three distinct and potentially conflicting views of effectiveness. The first view is that an

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Miles, Robert H. Macro Organizational Behavior. Glenview, IL.: Scott Foresman and Company, 1980.

organization is effective to the extent that its priorities are similar to the priorities of those who pay the bill. The study reported by Richard Armenta was an effort to assess this type of effectiveness in a cooperative project involving the Maricopa Community Colleges.

A second view maintains that effectiveness can be measured by assessing the level of agreement among faculty and administrators, in terms of their support for institutional priorities. Ann Highum will report an attempt to examine effectiveness from this perspective in a cooperative research project carried out with the Cuyahoga Community College District.

A third view of effectiveness involves the extent to which organizational goals are achieved. We don't have an example of this type of study because it is so difficult to get agreement on measurable goals for human service organizations. In fact, we think this may be the least useful way of studying effectiveness in the context of urban colleges. We do believe, however, that contrasting institutional effectiveness, measured as the ability to attract external support with institutional effectiveness, conceptualized as internal agreement, may help to identify and illuminate some of the conflicting forces with which key administrators in urban colleges must cope, as well as the strategies available to them for reconciling the two perspectives.

In closing, let me comment briefly on the ways in which we work with urban community colleges inthe conduct of research relevant to the issues they face.

First, we try to be certain that the focus of the research is on an issue of importance to the community college. This goal is achieved when the urban

college commits some of its own time and resources to the study because they are interested in the results. Second, we try to avoid confusing research with consulting. Faculty and graduate students devote some of their own time and resources to the study because they are interested in understanding an important problem more completely. The relationship is thus a partnership. Third, urban community college researchers are asked to join with university researchers in developing the research design, in interpreting the results and in developing recommendations. My time here does not permit describing a recent research design meeting conducted at Arizona State in connection with our Ford funded transfer opportunities project. I do want to emphasize that for three days representatives from eight urban universities, and eight urban community colleges, met and hammered out the essential elements of the project design. After data has been collected, the same group will participate in interpreting the results and developing the recommendations.

Indeed, this forum has been designed to model the research process I have described. Our chair is a key administrator from the Maricopa Community Colleges, which funded and participated in the research Richard Armenta will describe. Our reactor is a key administrator in the Cuyahoga District, which participated in the project to be described by Ann Highum. Her comments will be useful in the work that has yet to be done before this latter project will be ready for publication.

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